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THE TIME BANDIT

What U.S. workers surrender to get greater flexibility in work schedules

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The current economic expansion has gone far to remedy many stubborn labor market problems, but it actually may be exacerbating the maldistribution of work hours. While overemployment—working more hours than preferred at a current job and pay level—appears to be growing, some segments of the U.S. workforce are working fewer hours than they would like. In 1998, 46% of workers spent more than 40 hours per week on the job, with 18% working more than 50 hours. But 4.9% of the labor force was unemployed in 1997 and an additional 4.0% were underemployed (i.e., wanted to work but had stopped looking or were employed part time but wanted full-time work).

The scheduling and distribution of work hours has always been an important family issue, but it is becoming increasingly so as the number of dual-earner households, family annual hours of work, and employment-to-population ratios all climb to record levels. A major first step toward creating a more family-friendly workplace would be to foster more flexibility and less volatility in the timing of work hours. Today's time-crunched families would benefit greatly from more work-hour flexibility (the ability of employees to adjust the length or timing of their work week), and less work-schedule volatility (the degree to which the length or schedule of work hours varies unpredictably at the employer's discretion). These changes will require a fundamental restructuring of workplaces, managerial practices, and labor markets in order to allow the 21st century workers to better balance the competing demands on their time.

Flexibility

Flexibility in the daily starting and ending times of work not only helps reduce time-management pressures on workers but also opens the door for workers to shorten, either temporarily or indefinitely, their working hours at their current job. Greater flexibility may also actually enhance the performance of workplaces and the macroeconomy.

Table 1
Workers* with flexible schedules, 1985-97

	1985	1989	1991	1997
All	12.4%	11.9%	15.1%	27.6%
Men	13.1	12.9	15.5	28.7
Women	11.3	10.6	14.5	26.2
White	12.8	12.5	15.5	28.7
Black	9.1	8.2	12.1	20.1
Hispanic	8.9	9.0	10.6	18.4

*Full-time, wage and salary workers.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau 1998.

Table 1 shows that, in 1997, daily work schedule flexibility was available to 27.6% of the workforce, up from 15.1% in 1991, according to Census Bureau data. Despite this welcome gain, other surveys suggest this growth in flexibility still lags behind workers' demands for more flexible schedules. Moreover, it is not yet clear if this growth is simply a temporary cyclical phenomenon (e.g., the aging of the workforce) or a shift in the way employers attempt to attract and retain labor (i.e., a movement away from gains in pay toward improvements in working conditions). It is also worth noting that surveys of *firms* by private research groups and the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that the proportion of firms saying that they offer flextime is two to three times higher than the proportion of *workers* who report they have such flexibility.

Access to flexible work schedules is highly unequal by gender, race, educational attainment, occupation, the number of hours worked per week, and employment status. Those workers with less work-time flexibility include non-whites, women, unmarried workers, those with the least education, and those in lower-skilled occupations. Furthermore, full-time workers have less flexibility in schedules than part-timers. **Table 2** shows that people working a 40-hour "standard" work week have a significantly reduced chance of having access to flexible daily schedules, as do workers who describe their work shift as either a standard day shift or a night shift. To increase their likelihood of having schedule flexibility, a full-time worker must usually work no less than 50 hours per week. Alternatively, they must be willing to work part time, be self-employed, work on an evening shift, or obtain a college degree. These all require substantial financial and/or personal sacrifices. Union membership also enhances access to flextime, contrary to the widespread impression that unions are generally unreceptive or resistant to flexible scheduling.

A worker's occupation and, to a somewhat lesser degree, industry also impact the likelihood of having a flexible schedule. Significantly greater flexibility exists for managers, professionals, laborers (particularly farm workers and freight handlers), and technical, sales, and secretarial workers. On the other hand, craft workers have less flexibility in daily work, as do local and federal government workers (despite years of effort by the executive branch to establish the federal government's policies as a "best practice" model to follow regarding flextime).

Table 2
Workers with flexible schedules by average weekly hours (%)

Hours	Percentage
1-20	62.2%
21-34	45.0
35-39	33.2
40	22.7
41-49	33.3
50+	52.2

Source: Author's analysis of BLS data.

Volatility

A sizable share of the workforce experiences volatility in its usual work hours. Workers who are non-white, female, unmarried, part-timers, private sector, non-union, or employed in less-skilled occupations are all more likely to have volatile hours. But variable work week length is also strongly associated with access to flexible daily schedules. This association is particularly strong among part-time workers whose usual hours tend to vary from week to week. These findings suggest that workers with daily start- and end-time flexibility get less, not more, stability or predictability in their hours of work per week. Thus, under current circumstances, workers will likely face difficulty getting the kind of worker-friendly flexible hours that so many of them crave unless they are willing to accept jobs with greater scheduling volatility or worse compensation.

The way forward

These findings help explain the continued increase in hours worked by both men and women in the majority of U.S. households. While this growth in work hours is being accompanied by some increase in work flexibility, workers must still be willing to sacrifice either potential earning power or leisure time to gain access to these kinds of schedules. In other words, they must work an average of 50 or more hours per week, become self-employed—which often also means long hours (for men) or reduced pay (for women)—or work part time.

As for the overall economy, the strong productivity gains of the past several years may, in part, be due to the productivity-enhancing effects of improved timing of work activities offered to some workers. In addition, the tight labor market has led some trade unions to seek flextime arrangements via collective bargaining.

A new national policy is needed regarding working hours, one that recognizes the multiple demands on workers' time and the long-run economic benefits that can result from accommodating these workers. Recent first steps include both the Clinton Administration's efforts to amend the Family and Medical Leave Act to allow state unemployment insurance funds to pay for parental leave time and the initiatives by some states to provide annual time-off budgets for employees with family and medical needs. What will not help these families is more legislation like the recent Republican-led proposal to replace national overtime pay requirements with compensatory time off (*Working Families Flexibility Act of*

1999, HR 1380). Without promoting fundamental changes in the way the number and timing of work hours are determined in workplaces, these proposed changes would be more apt to increase rather than reduce the average overtime for affected workers and overemployment of the already most-overburdened workers.

What is required is a more coherent set of policy changes designed to enhance scheduling flexibility for the 73% of workers who currently lack it. Only more customized or individualized work hours and schedules will provide full-time workers with the flexibility they need to achieve their optimal number of working hours, whether that be 35 or 55 hours per week. This flexibility, in turn, would help to facilitate the sorely needed transfer of work and income from the estimated 13-23% of the workforce that is currently involuntarily overemployed to those workers who are unemployed and underemployed. Not only would such a workplace truly be more worker- and family-friendly, but it would also reduce costly and unnecessary worker turnover.

Further reading

Golden, Lonnie. 2000. *Time on the Job: Flexibility and Volatility in Work Hours*. Technical Paper. Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute.